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Viewing cable 06JEDDAH505, HEJAZI SCHOLARS SHARE VIEWS ON RELIGION AND

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Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cable's unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06JEDDAH505	2006-07-29 04:05	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Consulate Jeddah

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SUBJECT: HEJAZI SCHOLARS SHARE VIEWS ON RELIGION AND
POLITICS

¶B. B) 05 JEDDAH 3362.

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana Gfoeller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: Consul General and ConGenOffs reached out to religious scholars, including the liberal religious scholar Dr. Sami M. Angawi, in Jeddah to hear their views on the status of Islam in the Kingdom and how it is practiced in the nation's traditionally diverse Hejaz region. The scholars focused on the discrepancies between religion currently and how it was practiced more than 20 years ago, and opined that the Saudi government is stifling religious diversity nationwide. As a result of Dr. Angawi's open rhetoric he lost his position as a guide for Hajj pilgrims and was warned by the Ministry of Information not to associate with Westerners anymore. END SUMMARY.

A WARNING FROM THE MINISTRY: NO MORE WESTERN PRESS

¶12. (C) ConGenOffs met with Dr. Sami M. ((Angawi)), a prominent architect and liberal religious thinker, three times during the past month (Note: for detailed information on the Consul General's meeting, see following septel. End Note). As one of Jeddah's steadiest voices for dialogue, Angawi is well known to the Consulate General and, in the past, has been open about his views on the harm that comes from limiting public discourse on religion to only the views of the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence, also known as Wahhabis (Ref A, Ref B). He even was willing to express that point of view on the US-sponsored Al Hurrah television channel, which drew criticism that Angawi is acting as a mouthpiece for the United States. As a result, Angawi said that he was called into the Ministry of Information offices in Jeddah on June 21 and given a "polite but clear" warning to no longer speak his mind to "Western media." He then offhandedly told PolOff that he expected possible future warnings to include orders to stop meeting with Westerners altogether. Previously, his criticism of the SAG had resulted in his being banned from acting as a guide for Hajj pilgrims, which he had done for over two decades.

SAUDI VERSION OF ISLAM UNLIKELY TO CHANGE

¶13. (C) Angawi admits that he is concerned by the way in which Islam is now practiced in Saudi Arabia but does not see much hope of an improvement in the near-term. He praised King Abdullah for moving ahead on reform but remained pessimistic about long-term change. Angawi, who is fond of using analogies to emphasize his views, described Mecca as the "heart" of Islam and compared the pilgrims who believe they are purified by coming to Mecca during the Hajj to blood that circulates through a human body and then flows back to the heart to be renewed. He stressed that Mecca should be impartial but instead sees that "the heart is in disequilibrium." He claims that the traditional open exchange of ideas, which 50 years ago included all five schools of Islamic thought, has been replaced with only the conservative strain of Wahhabism. Angawi sadly added that in Saudi Arabia "the difference is that Islam has gone from being the origin to being the authority." He was equally skeptical when asked if there would ever be a chance of a split happening between the ruling Al Saud family and the Al Sheikh family, which for centuries has controlled religious practices. Angawi likened the two families to Siamese twins whose best chance for survival means remaining joined.

CHALLENGES IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

¶4. (C) Dr. Ibrahim A. ((NATTO)) and Dr. Sadig A. ((MALKI)), scholars and friends of Angawi who are also versed in Islam and current events, shared similar concerns during a roundtable discussion held at Angawi's house on July 16. Natto, whose specialty is higher education, and Malki (Ref B), who teaches political science at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, said they have felt the limitations in their work. They both recommended increasing cultural awareness as a way of breaking down barriers but lamented that the SAG makes it very difficult for dialogue to continue at any level.

¶5. (C) Speaking about the violence in Israel-Lebanon, Malki mentioned that his students were disenchanted with the SAG's handling of the situation. Noting that "they all laughed" about the July 14 statement issued by the SAG, Malki explained that the broader feeling is that Israel over-reacted in their attacks and that the Kingdom should not just pretend to be neutral when innocent Arabs are being killed. Additionally, Angawi noted his deep sadness by the current events and wished that the international community would ascribe the same value to Muslim, Christian and Jewish children. He stated that he felt that the Israeli response was disproportionate to the kidnapping of their soldiers.

¶6. (C) The scholars also stressed that the U.S. image in Saudi Arabia has continued to decline, while leaders such as Osama Bin Laden and Hizballah's Nasrallah are praised. They suggested that the United States needs to be a more even-handed player in the Middle East, but added that even if attempts are made to help all sides, Washington is still unlikely to be considered neutral. Angawi also told ConGenOffs that the "weight" of all people is not the same, and that there should be a distinction between the actions that are permissible against soldiers and those used on innocent civilians.

Gfoeller